

The Comanches

561 girls and less definitely for boys. However, the physical passage from childhood to maturity does not necessarily coincide with the social transfer of the individual from one status to the other. Although the actual transition was made more quickly in Comanche society than in our own, where both men and woman remain legally children until long after they are physically mature, clear-cut lines of division between the various groupings were lacking. Age classes were lacking. In the change from boyhood to manhood, for instance, the real test was whether the boy was able to follow the strenuous life of a warrior.

888 The tendency for societies to emphasize the individual's first change in age status and largely ignore the change from adult to old age is due in part to the difficulty of determining the onset of old age. But in certain societies the change from the adult to the old status is made more difficult for the individual by the fact that the patterns for the new status require a different personality. This was true in Comanche society. Although society provided for old people fairly well and treated them with respect, there is abundant evidence that the transition was a difficult one for most individuals. "A brave man," said the Comanches, "dies young."

Women were able to make the change with less difficulty than men, and the line was more clearly discernible. During and before the menopause there were a number of social tabus or restrictions. They could not remain in the same room with a medicine man. Afterwards they were released from restrictions pertaining to the supernatural, and henceforth could handle sacred objects, obtain power through dreams, and practice as shamans.²⁴

887 In the case of men, the ascribed status for old age differed radically from that for adults. The adult male was a warrior, vigorous, self-reliant, and aggressive. He took what he could get and held what he had without much regard for the abstract rights of those weaker than himself. A ready willingness to arbitrate differences or to ignore slights was a sign of weakness resulting in loss of prestige. The old man, on the other hand, was expected to be wise and gentle, willing to overlook slights, and, if need be, to endure abuse. It was his task to work for the welfare of the tribe, giving sound advice, smoothing down quarrels, and even preventing his tribe from making new

²⁴ Informant: Medicine Woman; see also Linton, *The Study of Man*, 119.

From Cradle to Grave

enemies. Young men strove for war and honor; old men for peace and tranquility. Warriors did not prepare for old age, thinking it better to be killed in action than to adjust themselves to the status ascribed for old age and to eventual death on the sick bed. When waning physical powers forced them to assume a new role, many did so grudgingly, and those who were able to keep strong medicine attempted to hold the rights which belonged to the younger status. Such bad old men were a peril to young ones beginning their career, for they were jealous of them simply because they were young and strong and admired by the women. The old men could and did kill young men by malevolent magic. "It is significant that although benevolent medicine men might be of any age in Comanche folklore, malevolent ones were always old."²⁵ 887 888●

Old men who were no longer able to go on the warpath had a special tipi, called the Smoke Lodge, wherein they gathered at the end of the day to smoke and talk. No boys or women were allowed to enter. Initiatory rites were not held for new members, and apparently no invitations were sent to prospective members. When one became old enough to be interested primarily in the past, he merely started going to the meetings. The men were free to come and go as they liked. If the camp was not permanently located, the men merely gathered at a convenient place and sat in a circle smoking and talking like a bunch of old gaffers about the cracker barrel. In permanent camps they had a lodge. 887 [345]

Each evening's session was opened with a ritual. The lodge possessed a large common pipe which was in the care of the leader. While the lighting of the pipe was in process, no word could be uttered. Absolute silence prevailed. The leader sat opposite the door. The fire-tender, a captive, sat next to the door, to the right as one entered. The leader lighted the pipe, and then offered invocation. He held the pipe up and prayed to the sun. This done, a pinch of tobacco was taken from the bowl and laid upon the ground as an offering to the Earth. If at any stage of the process the silence was broken, it was necessary to start anew. When the pipe was prepared, the fire-tender crossed directly to the leader and tendered a live coal. With the issuance of smoke the ceremony was done and the men could

²⁵ Linton, *The Study of Man*, 118-21.

From Cradle to Grave

When the sun was shining you were mighty nice. When the sun went down you were devils. Don't you remember how you were? Boys will be boys.²⁰ 887 522

They all laughed and let the matter drop. After all they were old men—peaceable, and not warriors jealous of their dignity.

Although they were a strong physical race of people, the Comanches were troubled with a number of diseases. Many of their ailments were due to their unbalanced diet, to exposure, and to the vigorous life they led. Among their more serious ailments were pneumonia, colds, rheumatism, wounds, broken bones, intestinal diseases, rattlesnake bites, smallpox, and cholera. The number with weak eyes, partially or completely blind, was appalling. Fevers often resulted from their trips to the east and south. The white intruders brought cholera, smallpox, and syphilis, which swept away many of the people. Epidemics of smallpox took heavy tolls in 1816, in 1839-40, and in the winter of 1861-62. The cholera epidemic of 1849, brought from the East by immigrants on the road to California, possibly resulted in more fatalities than the smallpox plague. In any event, whether from violence, disease, or old age, the end came inevitably to every Comanche as to every man—and the cycle was closed. 164

When the condition of an elderly person became hopeless, he was usually "thrown away" by all except his most faithful relatives and friends; and sometimes even they would desert him. This was not due so much to lack of affection and sympathy as from fear of the evil spirits and his ghost, which were believed to have taken possession of his body. When he felt death drawing near, he made disposition of all his property and retired to a quiet spot to die. After making medicine in preparation, an old man might take his own life, and at least one case is known where a man took the life of his wife by cutting her throat because she was hopelessly ill and lonely. 763 888 [762]

There was not a long delay between death and burial. If possible, burial took place the same day. The body was prepared with great care by anyone who would undertake the job, usually near relatives assisted by a comrade or close friend of the deceased. A woman attended to the body of a woman; a man attended to a man's. When a small child died, it was buried still lashed to its cradle-board. Before 764

²⁰ Informant: That's It.

The Comanches

701

● 888

“ “ “ This *pukutsi* was going through the camp, singing as usual.

An old woman stopped him and said, “*Pukutsi*, I want you to kill me a buffalo. I need the hide to use for my saddle; I have no boys to get one for me.”

He went and was gone from the camp for a long time. Finally he came back at night with the whole skin of a Pawnee, even with hands and feet still on it, and he hung it up like a man standing there against her arbor.

Some man saw it there and called in to her in her lodge, “That *pukutsi* is back. Your hide is out here on the arbor.”

Early in the morning she got up and went out to get it. That human skin frightened her. Then that man came by and told her she should not have asked a *pukutsi* to do such a job. “He is afraid of nothing.”

“Well, I didn’t ask him to bring me an enemy,” she complained. But that’s the way it is with *pukutsi*. You ask them to do one thing and they do just the opposite.

When she got over her first scare, the old woman jumped up and down and sang. She had an enemy scalp, which she kept. » » »

728

648

The waging of war was a matter of individual initiative, but the making of peace was a matter for the chiefs. A war leader on a raid could make peace in behalf of his own party on his own authority, but such a peace was not binding upon other members of the band or upon the tribe. Band peace was made only upon consent of the war leaders, the council of elders, and the head chief. Tribal peace could be attained only when agreed upon and recognized by all the bands.

For all their devotion to war, the Comanches accepted the fact that a people cannot fight everybody on all fronts at once. The home base had to afford some measure of security for hunting and everyday living. Thus the Comanches worked out a sort of national policy of defensive alliances with their more powerful neighbors to their north, keeping their southern, western, and eastern frontiers open for far-ranging aggressive action.

Peace with the Kiowas was cemented in 1790 through the good offices of a mutual Spanish friend.²⁹ No details of this step are known,

100 • THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF ILLNESS

578
754 rationale for witchcraft, especially between males, in the nomadic Comanche culture. In a society which emphasized physical prowess, the old and enfeebled were
561 at a definite disadvantage. The older men could not join the younger in the
754 prestigious activities of war, sexual adventuring, and hunting, and they were
561 therefore forced to turn to magic and supernatural means if they desired to continue
554 their futile attempts to compete for social power and prestige with the
578 younger men of the tribe. Since Comanche culture was not oriented to allow an individual to acquire prestige and position through material acquisition alone, this avenue was also denied the older men.

Factors in the Decline of Witchcraft

754 Perhaps a factor contributing to the lessening incidences of witchcraft, noted
178 by Sanapia even in her own time, can be attributed to the fact that in the post-reservation period the older men of the tribe were able to acquire a certain economic
561 power through such channels as land allotments and welfare, while at the same time the younger men were being denied their main traditional avenue to
536 prestige—war. Thus a more tolerable balance developed between the prestige and
578 social power levels of the young and the old. The woman, whose social position rose and fell with the male to whom she was attached, also acquired the benefits of this postreservation phenomenon. A woman could own land like a male, and with older women this became an attraction to the younger men, men perhaps born too late to take full advantage of the land allotments. Therefore, an older and economically more powerful woman could more successfully compete with a younger woman for available males.

754 However, neither economic power nor supernatural methods can cause a woman to produce offspring after she has reached a certain advanced age. In a
178 moment of anger or spite, a young Comanche woman's invectives directed toward
561 an old woman will inevitably include a caustic reminder to the older woman of her "uselessness" as a woman. Sanapia and many of my female Comanche informants
578 mentioned the potential dangers which a young woman exposes herself and her children to when she flaunts her offspring in front of an older woman whose children have left her. This, in Sanapia's opinion, is the reason for the high degree of witchcraft and why Sanapia immediately accuses an old woman for the act of witchcraft.

754 Several other factors can be suggested as relevant to the decline of Comanche witchcraft. With the allotment of lands the various family units within
178 the same band became more isolated, and thus any possibility of an act which
578 could motivate an individual to operate witchcraft against another member of that band became lessened as relatively forced social proximity, as was the case in the reservation period, became lessened among band members.

754 As the band's economic function was destroyed, the individual family units were compelled to become more independent. Thus, the older members of
178 the Comanche extended families were necessarily allotted tasks as more jobs had
887 to be handled by a smaller number of individuals. In this manner the older people
888

FACTORS IN THE DECLINE OF WITCHCRAFT • 101

served a valuable function to the group and were therefore able to retain a certain amount of prestige. Another factor which no doubt contributed to the raising of the prestige of older Comanches and therefore to the decline in witchcraft was the influence of Christianity with its stress on respect for the aged.

The suggestions which I have offered and which I feel are necessary for an understanding of the relative insignificance of witchcraft among contemporary Comanches are all ultimately rooted in the dynamics of acculturation. Witchcraft has disappeared as an effective means of social control among Comanches as its function has become obliterated by the changes brought about by acculturation with the dominant white society. Nothing served to directly replace the institution of Comanche witchcraft. This type of institution became meaningless as the very foundations for its existence were destroyed by the acculturative phenomenon which served to augment, equalize, and temporally lengthen, through essentially economic means, the levels of social power and prestige obtainable by all Comanche individuals.

492 lose his balance, but the larger Indian boys, and some of the younger
571 Indian men, began to give him a bad time.

It was as though they had been waiting for him to make a mistake.
• [888] They were telling him he was too old even to get on a horse, let alone
ride one. Some of the remarks were much less polite and even ribald.
The old Indian turned his angry gaze on them and spat out an invective
that tended to silence them. What he said was not in my vocabulary,
and I never learned what he called them.

492 Then he turned back to his horse, shortened up his hold on the
reins, and vaulted completely over the stallion, landing lightly on his
feet, and then vaulted onto the horse's back. Then he proceeded to
the starting line and won himself a horse race.

I have stood near this horse's shoulders, and his withers were higher
than my eyes—possibly as high as the top of my head, five feet ten
and a half inches. In other words, this horse stood seventeen to eighteen
hands high.

554 The old fellow was almost too fabulous to be believed in. As nearly
as I was able to discern, he was already a Comanche legend, though
he still lived. Mostly he was held in awe by the other Indians, especially
by the younger ones. Maybe he was the bogeyman the elders threatened
571 the children with. This one time was the only time I ever saw
anyone try to take liberties with him. I doubt that those young Indians
would have done so then but for the presence of many white people,
U.S. marshals, and Indian police.

000 Almost any version of the story of the one-eyed man at the three-
ringed circus could have been applied to me when I hit the Comanche
country in the early days of March, 1902. I had had my fourteenth
birthday in January. Everything was new. Everything was wonderful.
I would not have changed a single thing.

Since I am Scotch, the love of the land is as much a part of me as
the color of my skin or my hair. I am not trying to sound poetic when
I say that the sweep of the grass-covered Comanche prairies was soul-
satisfying. West Cache Creek, then the most beautiful of prairie
streams, furnished the finest fishing and swimming that I have ever
enjoyed, anywhere, any time.

136 There were wild ducks most months of the year, snipe, kildee,
plover, doves, curlew, and some bobwhite for my gun. The young of
a small variety of cottontail rabbits that lived in the prairie dog towns
and were called prairie dog rabbits fell to my rifle. They were superior